DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 185 573 CS 205 489

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TITLE Poetry Theater--Integrating Drama and Poetry.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the combined Annual Meeting of the Conference on English Education and the Secondary School English Conference (Pittsburgh, PA, March 15-18, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Choral Speaking; *Drama; Elementary Secondary Education; *Oral Interpretation; *Poetry; Readers Theater; *Student Attitudes; Student Motivation; Teaching Guides; Teaching Methods; *Theater Arts

ABSTRACT

Designed to help students respond in a positive way to poetry, poetry theater integrates dramatic technique with various aspects of reading, writing, analyzing, and reciting poetry. Poetry theater presentations require approximately five class periods to complete, allowing 45 minutes per class. The first class period should be devoted to choral reading. In this period, the class should be familiarized with the techniques of choral reading and then broken into groups of five or six students. Each group then creates a presentation of the same poem used with the entire class. The second class session should be devoted to the discussion of themes for a presentation, finding poems related to the theme chosen; selecting lines, phrases, or words from those poems to use in the presentation; deciding on the final order of the poem to be presented; assigning specific lines to people in the group; determining appropriate movements and voice levels; and practicing. The third and fourth class sessions should involve refinement of the presentation, and the last session is the presentation itself. In addition to providing positive experiences with poetry, poetry theater gives students valuable group work experiences and helps them to become more creative. (FL)

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POETRY THEATER - INTEGRATING DRAMA AND POETRY

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Workshop presented at the National Council of Teachers of English CEE/Secondary Section Program, 1979

The Poetry Theater approach integrates dramatic technique with various aspects of reading, writing, analyzing and reciting of poetry. The development of Poetry Theater was prompted by my search for ways to help middle and junior high school students become more positive and responsive when asked to read or write poetry, and has proved successful in classrooms from grade four through college. As students create Poetry Theater presentations in groups, they not only search for and read poems; but also become excited about selecting lines from poems, adding lines, and ultimately generating a unique poem for dramatic presentation. The following description of the Poetry Theater approach can be easily modified to be used with almost any grade level beyond the primary grades.

POETRY THEATER ACTIVITY CARD appears on the following page. The detailed description for the reader's benefit correlates with the activity card and should clarify the process for implementation.

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POETRY THEATER ACTIVITY CARD

Steps With The Class

1. Divide into groups of 5 or 6 to practice CHORAL READING of the same poem. Focus on presenting the poem using different voices, different levels and dramatic interpretation.

2. Discuss possible THEMES for Poetry Theater presentations, looking through poetry books and other sources to find a topic (Ex: seasons, night, feelings, animals, holiday...).

Steps Within Each Group — POETRY THEATER PRESENTATION

1. Select a theme for your group. Come to agreement about your theme, using poetry books to help determine a topic (Ex: people, colors, houses, love, fear, need, money...).

2. Skim through poetry books and other sources to find 5 or 6 poems (minimum of one from each group member) relating in some way to your theme.

3. From poems found, select lines, phrases or words to include in your presentation. You will integrate several poems and add ORIGINAL LINES, creating an original group poem.

4. As you determine lines to be used from published poems, write the source. Include author, poem title, book and page. This will enable you to cite works used in the group poem.

5. Decide on the final order of the poem which the group is creating. Try several variations, listening to various arrangements before writing out the group poem for each member.

6. Assign specific lines to people in the group. Use various voices (solo,echo,group...) to determine which combinations sound best for your poem. People should have more than one turn during the presentation and should learn the entire poem.

7. Determine appropriate movements, gestures, voices and levels to give the presentation a dramatic quality. Try variations before making a final decision.

8. PRACTICE until you feel confident about your Poetry Theater presentation. Each group will show its POETRY THEATER to the class.

The explanation of Poetry Theater provided below follows the progression outlined in the POETRY THEATER ACTIVITY CARD. Approximate class period directions are provided, allowing forty-five minutes per period. The introductory lesson would be best done in one period, with shorter amounts of time from class sessions allowed to complete the group work required. Most classes should be able to complete Poetry Theater presentations by the end of one week, if time is given daily for a portion of the period.

FIRST CLASS PERIOD (approximately 45 minutes)

I. Choral Reading With the Class

Pass out any short poem (or use a literature book) and practice choral reading, demonstrating variations of voices. The following are samples of possible directions to students.

- First row or group says the first line.
- Two or three voices say the first few words of the next line.
- Each person of the next group or row says one word each of the following line.
- The class says any repeating refrain or line.
- One voice says the beginning syllable of the word, and three voices complete the word.
- Two voices say the last few words and the next voice repeats (echoes) those words.

Make assignments of this type until the entire poem's reading has been designated.

Using the same poem, provide different directions for voice variations (whisper, draw out the word, clip syllables, shriek...) and for movement (stand, reach out, look upward, hang head, some stand, some sit on floor...). By directing the entire class, you provide models of various approaches for incorporating dramatic techniques into choral reading.

II. Choral Reading In Groups

Divide the class into groups of five or six, insisting that no group contain all males or all females. My rationale for this stipulation is to provide greater variety in voice and presentation of the poetry reading. Since the group formed for this choral reading activity will be the same group which will work together to create the Poetry Theater, I find it important to establish the cooperative nature of the task at this point.

Each group is instructed to take the same poem as used in the class choral reading and to create a presentation, incorporating movement, various voices and use of different levels. Encourage groups to focus first on voice, then to incorporate movement and levels (visual effect of some standing, others sitting...). Movement for each phrase or word in not necessary and should not be encouraged.

Each group needs to reach consensus to determine the manner of its presentation. Students should be encouraged to try suggestions made by group members, experimenting with variations until consensus is reached. A time limit needs to be given, with a reminder when five minutes are left. I generally emphasize that this will not be a finished product since time is limited. The purpose of this activity, as explained to the groups, is to work on the process of preparing a Poetry Theater presentation.

One group at a time shows its presenation of the poem. After each presentation, ask audience groups to focus on the variations and approaches used in the observed presentation, pointing out effective techniques employed by the group. In some cases, groups have difficulty reaching consensus and working cooperatively. Their presentations may not be ready to show, and the alternative I've used is to have the group merely say the poem. Since the emphasis is on the process, not product, time limits should be maintained.

SECOND SESSION (The following could be done in one period or parts of two periods.)

I. Distribution and Discussion of Poetry Theater Activity Card

Provide a copy of the Poetry Theater Activity card for each student. Review the directions, beginning with "Steps With the Class," pointing out that step one was done the previous period.

Brainstorm theme possibilities with the class after clarifying the understanding of "theme." List suggestions on the board, providing topics at intervals during the brainstorming. Seasons, times of day, feelings (ranging from love to fear), necessities, specific holidays, machines, specific colors, weather (sun, rain, moon and other aspects relating to nature), specific animals (cats, dogs, birds, insects, tigers), the sea, mountains, windows...are only some of the many possibilities. Remind students that the first task of the group will be to select a theme. They will have some time during class to do this, using poetry books and anthologies.

Steps Within Each Group directions are reviewed with the class before they are again divided into their groups formed during the previous session. Those absent the previous session can be added to groups already formed.

1. Select a theme for your group...

Students are told that they will use references before making a group decision. Theme selection is often based on poems available on themes of interest. Consensus will be necessary; but teacher guidance will be available. Groups having problems deciding on a theme would have a theme assigned to them by the teacher.

2. Skim through poetry books...to find poems relating to theme..

Remind students that each group member will have to contribute at least one poem relating to the theme. They will have some time in the library or will use classroom poetry books. In addition, they should explore other sources for poems, including home and the public library. The poetry contribution should be written in a form ready to share with the group. Original contributions of a student's are encouraged, in addition to use of a reference.

3. From poems found, select lines, phrases or words to include...

This step involves an important sharing process, where group members will read poems and lines selected. As they listen, group members will determine which lines, phrases and words should be included. An important step will be to create original lines or find a basic refrain which will tie together the different poems into one poem.

4. As you determine lines...write the source...

Review the need to write the reference used, both in terms of giving credit and for again finding the reference. You may decide to provide specific guidelines for writing references or merely stipulate the information which should be included. The samples on the following pages include references used, and suggest different formats.

5. Decide on the final order of the poem...

Encourage students to try many variations of line order and to experiment with different original lines created by group members. When some consensus has been reached, a copy of the completed group poem should be made for each group member, with an extra copy given to the teacher. Each group member could write out the poem, or one person could copy the poem on a master to be run off for everyone in the group.

6. Assign specific lines to people in the group...

Refer to the poetry presentations done the previous session. Encourage the group to practice many variations and to select the most interesting one. The group should use many voice variations for the presentation, making sure that line assignments are equitable.

7. Determine appropriate movements, gestures, voices and levels to give the presentation a dramatic quality...

Once lines are learned, group members will be ready to work on other aspects of the presentation. They can add movement, arrange themselves in various formations using different levels (heights, chairs, floor...), and add props (paper moon, snowflakes, costume...), if appropriate. The final product sought is a Poetry

Theater- a dramatic presentation of a group poem which would be viewed by an audience of peers and, perhaps, by other teachers.

8. Practice...show to class.

Students will need some time in class each day for work in groups on the Poetry Theater. The refinement of the presentation does take practice and time. With practice, groups can create Poetry Theaters which can be shown with confidence and pride.

If time permits following the review of directions, allow groups to use references and select a theme.

THIRD SESSION AND FOURTH SESSION

During these sessions, groups follow the steps outlined on the Poetry Theater Activity Card. While the groups are working, you rotate, assisting in decision-making and in guiding groups toward consensus. If appropriate, groups could,at this early stage, show trial runs of presentations, seeking feedback and suggestions for improvement from their peers or from the teacher. I have used videotaping to show students presentations for self-evaluation, and to share final productions with other classes.

FIFTH SESSION (If more time was given for allowing groups to refine presentations, this would be a later session.)

The PRESENTATION of the Poetry Theaters could be scheduled for a particular day in advance or be informally conducted when groups are ready. When groups are particularly proud of their presentations, they often wish to show them to other classes. This could be handled by students becoming "traveling players," where a particular group makes arrangements to visit a class to present its Poetry Theater; or, other classes could be invited to see all the Poetry Theater presentations. Videotaping of the presentations can be used for viewing by other classes and for critical viewing by the performers; particularly, if they wish to further refine presenations or to create new Poetry Theaters in the future.

CONCLUSION:

The obvious purpose of Poetry Theater is to involve students in reading, writing, creating and performing poetry. As I developed Poetry Theater and implemented it with students, I consciously tried to incorporate additional learning aspects within the framework of the approach. Based on teacher feedback and my own observations of students who have participated in Poetry Theater, I feel that in addition to experiences with poetry, students

gain positive group experiences, learn to be more open to variations and alternatives and become more creative in their thinking. With guidance and time for practice, groups do create Poetry Theaters which they are proud to perform and to publish.

The following poems were written by groups in grades five, six, seven and eight and represent Poetry Theater presentations created in my school system in the fall of the school year.

NOTE: Poetry Theater contains elements of Readers Theater, Story Theater and Chamber Theater, other approaches for dramatizing readings. Excellent descriptions of these "Theater" techniques for readings are contained in Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13 by James Moffett and Betty Jane Wagner (Houghton Mifflin, 1976). Any reading or English program would be enriched by the inclusion of these approaches which integrate drama with reading and writing.

SAMPLES OF POETRY THEATER GROUP POEMS

Lunenburg Public Schools, Massachusetts, Grades 5,6,7,8

Prince of Bombay (Grade Five)

Once upon a valley

There was a prince of Bombay
Who always wanted his own way

So he bought himself a horse
Which ran fast, of course
And now he spends his money on hay

"The horse that had a flat tire," Poems Here and Now, p.18-19 by Richard Brautigan

"Animals friendly and tame," Laughable Limericks,p.21 Walter Parke

by group: Pam,Bobby,Richard,Chris,Kevi
grade five

Birds (Grade Five)

Thrushes sing as the sun is going

Nesting in holes and making a mess

I don't much approve of its habits
And birds sing in ones and pairs
I think it can sing too

How pleasant the life of a bird must be

"Proud Songsters," A Flock of Words, Thomas Hardy,p.90

'The Starling," A Flock of Words, Jonathan Stobs,p.91

Other lines from "The Starling"

"Birds in Summer," My Poetry Book, Mary Howitt,p.235

Aunt Maud (Grade Five)

I remember, I remember

I had written to Aunt Maud
Who was on a trip abroad

What a fact!
She wrote me back
And said she'll be back in September

A Treasure Chest of Poetry by Thomas Hood

Humorous Poetry for Children by W.Cole

By group: Karen, David, Chris, Kenny

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Jack Frost's Winter (Grade Six)

Summer fading, winter comes

Frosty morning, tingling thumbs

(people sitting, moving hands)

Picture Books in Winter, Robert Louis Stevenson, "A Children's Guide to Verse"

Of a great forest

in one night

I make a wilderness

of white

(person throwing snow)

"The Snowflake" by Walter de la Mare
An Inheritance of Poetry, p.221

In the winter time we go

Walking in the fields of snow

(three people walk, then stop)

Every bush and every tree

Is as white, as white can be

(continue walking)

"White Fields" by James Stephens,
An Inheritence of Poetry, p.224

I glitter and fly

Beneath the sky

And lean against the gale

My feet wear blades

Of diamond dust

As I etch a frosty trail

(group skating)

"Skating" by Lee Bennett Hopkins and Misha Arenstein in Potato Chips p.60

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The Moon (Grade Six)

It's a slice of moon they cry (Chris)

A slice of slivery moon in a green sky (Jen & Pam)

The moon will not hurt me when I'm old (Jen & Mar)

But the years will make me sad and cold (All)

The moon is above the earth (Pam & Jen)

And it's been there since its birth (Mar)

The moon is in the sky at night (Chris)

It shines over the earth with a glowing light (All)

Hey, diddle, diddle, the physicists fiddle
(Pam) (Chris, Mar, Jen)

The bleep jumped over the moom (Pam)

The little dog laughed (Jen) To see such fun (Chris)

And died the following June (All)

Potato Chips and a Slice of Moon

"A Slice of Moon" by
M. Livingston, p.2

"Day Moon" by D. Thorr, p.47

Faces and Places

"The Traveler" by P. Hubbell

"The Slave of the Moon" by
M. Yarmen

Reflections on a Gift of
Watermelon Pickle
"Hey Didle, Diddle"by P. Dehn

Halloween (Grade Seven)

(1) Moan! (Maria) Wail! (JoAnn) Rustle!(Maria) Shriek! (JoAnn)

(2) Rattling windows (Stuart) doors that creak (Kyle)

(3) Shrieks of cats (Danielle) and flying bats (Kyle)

(4) Witches and their tall black hats (Maria and repeat by Dan.)

(5) Moans and groans in the night (JoAnn and "night" three times by all)

(6) And shadows from a pumpkin light (Danielle)

(7) White as a ghost (Stuart and Maria)

(8) That scares you the most (Kyle)

(9) Pale moon faces (Maria and Kyle), eyes of green (Stuart)

(10)Sh! (Joann & Kyle) Spooks! (Maria,Dan.,Stuart) Halloween!!!! (All)

Lines 1,2,3,9,10 from "Sh!Spooks!" by Florence Eakman, Poems for Children
Lines 4,8 from "Colors" by Mary O'Neill, Hailstones & Halibut Bones
Lines 5,8,6,7, MADE UP BY GROUP

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The Sea Farers (Grade Seven)

Far off, the sea is gray and still
as the sky (Ken,sitting on chair)

"A Weekend by the Sea," by E.L. Masters
Modern American Poetry

Great waves roar to the shore
(Heidi,Susan on desk)
Like conch shells (all)

Desolate and lone (sadly,John)

"Lost," by Carl Sandburg
Poems to Enjoy

All night long (Sheri,Ken)

On the sea where fog trails (Heidi,Susan repeat "trail")

And mist creeps (all creep with fingers)

The western tide crept (move slowly,Helen)

"Sands of Dee" by Charles Kingley
One Hundred Story Poems

along the sand (on chair,John,Sheri)

And o'er and o'er the sand (make circle with hands like when you're smoothing something)

As far as the eye could see (strain eyes as if looking for something)

The rolling came down (lower hand to the floor) and hid the sea

I must go down to the sea again

"Sea Fever," by Grace Huffard
My Poetry Book

To the lonely sea and the sky
(look up at sky)

The waves came down from the edge of the sky

"The Waves," by Jay Smith
Sea Ships and Sailors

The shattered water made a misty din

"Once by the Pacific," by Robert Frost
Modern American Poetry

I must go down to the sea again (All)
Again (All) Again (All whisper)

In The Beginning (Grade Seven)

In the beginning, If one there be

Imaginations,Other Places, p. 14

To the valley of death rode on a mare

Sea, Ships and Sailors, p.42

A demon so dark not seen in the night
A time when the moon was not very bright
Into the cemetery the demon rode
So brave, so brave, no fear he showed
But when he reached the passage to Hell,
Off came his head and down he fell.
The Village people, rich and poor, now were
free and feared no more.

All lines created by group

Thunderstorms (Grade Eight)

The wind began to rock the grass "Thunderstorms," by W. Cole
Book of Nature Poems

(steps kneeling in front of
audience, hands raised-one voice)

With threatening tunes and low!
(steps in front of audience, speaking powerfully-one voice)

He flung a menace at the earth/A menace at the sky!
(standing on chairs, hands upraised, speaking loudly - 3 voices)

Deep into the darkness peering The Raven by Edgar Allen
(speaking loudly and mysteriously - one voice)

Long I stood there wondering (softer, kneeling on chairs - 2 voices)

Fearing! (pretending to be afreaid - 6 voices)

And rained its life as though it bled "Red, Gold Rain," by S. Sitwell
(kneeling on chairs-one voice) Crystal Cabinet Poems

In the long days full of fire . .
(spoken softly - 2 voices)

We wake to hear the storm come down "So Ghostly Then, The Girl
Came In" by S. Sitwell

Sudden on roof and pane

(spoken strongly- 3 voices- repeat sudden, sudden, sudden)

The thunder's loud, and the hasty wind

hurries the beating rain (shouted in front of people - 4 voices)

And, in the windless hour between (spoken softly -one voice)

The last of daylight and night (same tone standing on chairs-2 voices)

When fields give up their ebbing green (3 voices and 2 for ebbing green)

And two bats interweave their flight (arms outstretched - all voices)

Love (Grade Eight)

Background Music: Evergreen by Barbara Streisand (played very softly)

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. (J.B. to Laura - J.B. kneeling)

What lips my lips have kissed and where and why
(Cheryl) (Larry)

To write and to command, to lust and to rage
(Laura) (J.B.) (Laura) (both standing)

forever be the same
(Cheryl,Larry (Caryn echoes line) (3 levels of height)

If no more I should see you, I shall send you still replies
(Laura) (Cheryl) (J.B.) (J.B.middle of girls)

What the eye loses , Let the heart recover
(Laura) (Caryn) (Larry) (Caryn)

One eve in the garden, I met the Love-Talker
(J.B.) (Larry) (Caryn & Cheryl)

Love is like a dizziness, Won't Let a poor man go about business
(Laura) (Cheryl) (Laura & Cheryl)

Love is like a singed pig hanging up for bacon
(All)(Caryn)(Cheryl) (Laura,Larry,& J.B.) (standing apart,semicircle)

Love is like a disease, leaves your poor heart achin'
(All) (Laura) (J.B.,Cheryl,Caryn) (Larry)

LOVE (all)

References:

Adventures in English Literature, p. 481 Sonnet 43 by Robert Browning Line #1

The Treasure of American Poetry, "What Lips My Lips Have Kissed" Lines #2,8,9

The Winged Horse Anthology,p.124,504 "Love's Diary" and "Lovesight" Lines #3,5

Modern American Poetry, p.560 "Change Then Forever by Louis Untermeyer Lines #6,4

The Poet, A New Book of Story Poems,p.192,194 Line #7
"The Love-talker" by William Cole

By Group Lines #10,#11